

NOAA bans commercial harvesting of krill

On July 13, 2009 The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) published a final rule in the Federal Register prohibiting the harvesting of krill in the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) off the coasts of California, Oregon, and Washington. The rule goes into effect on August 12, 2009. Krill are a small shrimp-like crustacean and a key source of nutrition in the marine food web.

The idea to save krill for marine life originally came from superintendents of the national marine sanctuaries off California, who became concerned in 2003 after rockfish populations declined, and later in 2005 when a downturn in krill populations was blamed for starving sea birds and other West Coast marine life.

The krill prohibition was adopted as Amendment 12 to the Coastal Pelagic Species Fishery Management Plan (FMP), which was developed by the Pacific Fishery Management Council (PFMC) under the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act.

The states themselves already have regulations prohibiting a krill harvest within three miles of their coasts. But, until now, no federal restriction protected the EEZ—between three and 200 miles out.

Interestingly, there is no commercial fishery for krill in these waters. This decision shows foresight in fisheries management, designed to preserve the foundation of a healthy marine food web in the California Current ecosystem, including its five National Marine Sanctuaries.

Krill are taken primarily off Antarctica, where scientists have raised concerns the fishery has upset the food web, making life tougher for penguins and other marine life. A smaller fishery has been going since the 1970s off British Columbia. The catch is processed into food for salmon farms, as well as home aquariums, and an oil consumed by people.



Krill are vitally important as primary consumers in this ecosystem, feeding on the primary producers: the microscopic phytoplankton that use the energy of sunlight to make life from nonlife. Numerous commercially important fish feed on krill, including salmon, rockfish, squid, sardine, mackerel and flatfish. Many endangered and threatened species forage on krill, including blue whales, humpback whales, and a variety of seabirds, including Sooty Shearwaters, Marbled Murrelets, and Common Murres.

The decision was praised by environmentalists as a new approach to fisheries management based on maintaining the overall health of an entire ecosystem, rather than just focusing on population numbers of one species at a time.

Links:

NOAA Press Release: http://swr.nmfs.noaa.gov/media/NR_Krill_final_swr_v1.pdf

Federal regulation: <http://frwebgate1.access.gpo.gov/cgi-bin/PDFgate.cgi?WAISdocID=700790334395+0+2+0&WASAction=retrieve>

NOAA's National Marine Fisheries Service: <http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/>

Pacific Fishery Management Council: <http://www.pcouncil.org/cps/cpsfmp/cpsa12.html>